

The Scarlet Ibis by James Hurst

It was in the clove of seasons,
summer was dead but autumn had not yet
been born, that the ibis lit in the bleeding
tree¹. The flower garden was strained with
5 rotting brown magnolia petals and
ironweeds grew rank² amid the purple
phlox. The five o'clocks by the chimney still
marked time, but the oriole nest in the elm
was untenanted and rocked back and forth
10 like an empty cradle. The last graveyard
flowers were blooming, and their smell
drifted across the cotton field and through
every room of our house, speaking softly
the names of our dead.

15 It's strange that all this is still so
clear to me, now that summer has long
since fled and time has had its way. A
grindstone stands where the bleeding tree
stood, just outside the kitchen door, and
20 now if an oriole sings in the elm, its song
seems to die up in the leaves, a silvery
dust. The flower garden is prim, the house
a gleaming white, and the pale fence
across the yard stands straight and spruce.
25 But sometimes (like right now), as I sit in
the cool, green-draped parlor, the
grindstone begins to turn, and time with all
its changes is ground away-and I
remember Doodle.

30 Doodle was just about the craziest
brother a boy ever had. Of course, he
wasn't *crazy* crazy like old Miss Leedie,
who was in love with President Wilson and
wrote him a letter every day, but was a
35 nice crazy, like someone you meet in your

dreams. He was born when I was six and
was, from the outset, a disappointment.
He seemed all head, with a tiny body
which was red and shriveled like an old
40 man's. Everybody thought he was going to
die-everybody except Aunt Nicey, who had
delivered him. She said he would live
because he was born in a caul³, and cauls
were made from Jesus' nightgown. Daddy
45 had
Mr. Heath, the carpenter, build a little
mahogany coffin for him. But he didn't die,
and when he was three months old, Mama
and Daddy decided they might as well
50 name him. They named him William
Armstrong, which is like tying a big tail on a
small kite. Such a name sounds good only
on a tombstone.

I thought myself pretty smart at
55 many things, like holding my breath,
running, jumping, or climbing the vines in
Old Woman Swamp, and I wanted more
than anything else someone to race to
Horsehead Landing, someone to box with,
60 and someone to perch with in the top fork
of the great pine behind the barn, where
across the fields and swamps you could
see the sea. I wanted a brother. But Mama,
crying, told me that even if William
65 Armstrong lived, he would never do these
things with me. He might not, she sobbed,
even be "all there." He might, as long as he
lived, lie on the rubber sheet in the center
of the bed in the front bedroom where the
70 white marquissette⁴ curtains billowed out in

¹ **bleeding tree**: reference to a certain tree prevalent in the South; the name derives from the fact that the tree emits a milky substance whenever a branch is broken from it.

² **rank**: thick and wild. Rank also means "smelly" or "overripe."

³ **caul**: a membrane sometimes surrounding the head of a child at birth

⁴ **marquissette**: thin, netlike fabric.

the afternoon sea breeze, rustling like palmetto fronds⁵.

It was bad enough having an invalid⁶ brother, but having one who
75 possibly was not all there was unbearable, so I began to make plans to kill him by smothering him with a pillow. However, one afternoon as I watched him, my head poked between the iron posts of the foot
80 of the bed, he looked straight at me and grinned. I skipped through the rooms, down the echoing halls, shouting, "Mama, he smiled. He's all there! He's all there!" and he was.

85 When he was two, if you laid him on his stomach, he began to move himself, straining terribly. The doctor said that with his weak heart this strain would probably kill him, but it didn't. Trembling, he'd push
90 himself up, turning first red, then a soft purple, and finally collapse back onto the bed like an old worn-out doll. I can still see Mama watching him, her hand pressed tight across her mouth, her eyes wide and
95 unblinking. But he learned to crawl (it was his third winter), and we brought him out of the front bedroom, putting him on the rug before the fireplace. For the first time he became one of us.

100 As long as he lay all the time in bed, we called him William Armstrong, even though it was formal and sounded as if we were referring to one of our ancestors, but with his creeping around on
105 the deerskin rug and beginning to talk, something had to be done about his name. It was I who renamed him.

⁵ **palmetto** fronds: fanlike leaves of a palm tree

⁶ **invalid**: ill, disabled, or weak and sickly

When he crawled, he crawled backwards, as if he were in reverse and
110 couldn't change gears. If you called him, he'd turn around as if he were going in the other direction, then he'd back right up to you to be picked up. Crawling backward made him look like a doodlebug⁷, so I
115 began to call him Doodle, and in time even Mama and Daddy thought it was a better name than William Armstrong. Only Aunt Nicey disagreed. She said caul babies should be treated with special respect
120 since they might turn out to be saints. Renaming my brother was perhaps the kindest thing I ever did for him, because nobody expects much from someone called Doodle.

125 Although Doodle learned to crawl, he showed no signs of walking, but he wasn't idle. He talked so much that we all quit listening to what he said. It was about this time that Daddy built him a go-cart
130 and I had to pull him around. At first I just paraded him up and down the piazza⁸, but then he started crying to be taken out into the yard, and it ended up by my having to lug him wherever I went. If I so much as
135 picked up my cap, he'd start crying to go with me and Mama would call from where she was, "Take Doodle with you."

He was a burden in many ways. The doctor had said that he mustn't get
140 too excited, too hot, too cold, or too tired and that he must always be treated gently. A long list of don'ts went with him, all of which I ignored once we got out of the house. To discourage his coming with me,
145 I'd run with him across the ends of the

⁷ **doodlebug**: larva of a type of insect; also, a shuttle train that goes back and forth between stations

⁸ **piazza**: large covered porch

cotton rows and careen him around
corners on two wheels.

Sometimes I accidentally turned
him over, but he never told Mama. His skin
150 was very sensitive, and he had to wear a
big straw hat whenever he went out.
When the going got rough and he had to
cling to the sides of the go-cart, the hat
slipped all the way down over his ears. He
155 was a sight. Finally, I could see I was licked.
Doodle was my brother and he was going
to cling to me forever, no matter what I
did, so I dragged him across the burning
cotton field to share with him the only
160 beauty I knew, Old Woman Swamp. I
pulled the go-cart through the saw-tooth
fern, down into the green dimness where
the palmetto fronds whispered by the
stream. I lifted him out and set him down
165 in the soft rubber grass beside a tall pine.
His eyes were round with wonder as he
gazed about him, and his little hands
began to stroke the rubber grass. Then he
began to cry.

170 "For heaven's sake, what's the
matter?" I asked, annoyed.

"It's so pretty," he said. "So pretty,
pretty, pretty."

After that day Doodle and I often
175 went down into Old Woman Swamp. I
would gather wildflowers, wild violets,
honeysuckle, yellow jasmine,
snakeflowers, and waterlilies, and with
wire grass we'd weave them into necklaces
180 and crowns. We'd bedeck ourselves with
our handiwork and loll about thus
beautified, beyond the touch of the
everyday world. Then when the slanted
rays of the sun burned orange in the tops

185 of the pines, we'd drop our jewels into the
stream and watch them float away toward
the sea.

There is within me (and with
sadness I have watched it in others) a knot
190 of cruelty borne by the stream of love,
much as our blood sometimes bears the
seed of our destruction, and at times I was
mean to Doodle. One day I took him up to
the barn loft and showed him his casket,
195 telling him how we all had believed he
would die. It was covered with a film of
Paris green⁹ sprinkled to kill the rats, and
screech owls had built a nest inside it.

Doodle studied the mahogany box
200 for a long time, then said, "It's not mine."

"It is," I said. "And before I'll help
you down from the loft, you're going to
have to touch it."

"I won't touch it," he said sullenly.
205 "Then I'll leave you here by
yourself," I threatened, and made as if I
were going down.

Doodle was frightened of being
left. "Don't leave me, Brother," he cried,
210 and leaned toward the coffin. His hand,
trembling, reached out, and when he
touched the casket, he screamed. A
screech owl flapped out of the box into our
faces, scaring us and covering us with Paris
green. Doodle was paralyzed, so I put him
215 on my shoulder and carried him down the
ladder, and even when we were outside in
the bright sunshine, he clung to me, crying,
"Don't leave me. Don't leave me."

220 When Doodle was five years old, I
was embarrassed at having a brother of
that age who couldn't walk, so I set out to

⁹ **Paris green:** poisonous green powder used to
kill insects.

teach him. We were down in Old Woman Swamp and it was spring and the sick-
225 sweet smell of bay flowers hung everywhere like a mournful song. "I'm going to teach you to walk, Doodle," I said.

He was sitting comfortably on the soft grass, leaning back against the pine.
230 "Why?" he asked.

I hadn't expected such an answer.
"So I won't have to haul you around all the time."

"I can't walk, Brother," he said.
235 "Who says so?" I demanded.
"Mama, the doctor-everybody."
"Oh, you can walk," I said, and I took him by the arms and stood him up. He collapsed onto the grass like a half-empty
240 flour sack. It was as if he had no bones in his little legs.

"Don't hurt me, Brother," he warned.

"Shut up. I'm not going to hurt you.
245 I'm going to teach you to walk." I heaved him up again, and again he collapsed.

This time he did not lift his face up out of the rubber grass. "I just can't do it. Let's make honeysuckle wreaths."

250 "Oh yes you can, Doodle," I said.
"All you got to do is try. Now come on," and I hauled him up once more.

It seemed so hopeless from the beginning that it's a miracle I didn't give
255 up. But all of us must have something or someone to be proud of, and Doodle had become mine. I did not know then that pride is a wonderful, terrible thing, a seed that bears two vines, life and death. Every
260 day that summer we went to the pine beside the stream of Old Woman Swamp, and I put him on his feet at least a hundred

times each afternoon. Occasionally I too became discouraged because it didn't
265 seem as if he was trying, and I would say, "Doodle, don't you want to learn to walk?"

He'd nod his head, and I'd say, "Well, if you don't keep trying, you'll never learn." Then I'd paint for him a picture of
270 us as old men, white-haired, him with a long white beard and me still pulling him around in the go-cart. This never failed to make him try again.

Finally one day, after many weeks
275 of practicing, he stood alone for a few seconds. When he fell, I grabbed him in my arms and hugged him, our laughter peeling through the swamp like a ringing bell. Now we knew it could be done. Hope no longer
280 hid in the dark palmetto thicket but perched like a cardinal in the lacy toothbrush tree, brilliantly visible. "Yes, yes," I cried, and he cried it too, and the grass beneath us was soft and the smell of
285 the swamp was sweet.

With success so imminent¹⁰, we decided not to tell anyone until he could actually walk. Each day, barring rain, we sneaked into Old Woman Swamp, and by
290 cotton-picking time Doodle was ready to show what he could do. He still wasn't able to walk far, but we could wait no longer. Keeping a nice secret is very hard to do, like holding your breath. We chose to
295 reveal all on October eighth, Doodle's sixth birthday, and for weeks ahead we mooned around the house, promising everybody a most spectacular surprise. Aunt Nicey said that, after so much talk, if we produced
300 anything less tremendous than the

¹⁰ **imminent**: about to take place

Resurrection¹¹, she was going to be disappointed.

At breakfast on our chosen day, when Mama, Daddy, and Aunt Nicey were
305 in the dining room, I brought Doodle to the door in the gocart just as usual and had them turn their backs, making them cross their hearts and hope to die if they peeked. I helped Doodle up, and when he
310 was standing alone I let them look. There wasn't a sound as Doodle walked slowly across the room and sat down at his place at the table. Then Mama began to cry and ran over to him, hugging him and kissing
315 him. Daddy hugged him too, so I went to Aunt Nicey, who was thanks praying in the doorway, and began to waltz her around. We danced together quite well until she came down on my big toe with her
320 brogans¹², hurting me so badly I thought I was crippled for life.

Doodle told them it was I who had taught him to walk, so everyone wanted to hug me, and I began to cry.

325 "What are you crying for?" asked Daddy, but I couldn't answer. They did not know that I did it for myself, that pride, whose slave I was, spoke to me louder than all their voices, and that Doodle
330 walked only because I was ashamed of having a crippled brother.

Within a few months Doodle had learned to walk well and his go-cart was put up in the barn loft (it's still there)
335 beside his little mahogany coffin. Now, when we roamed off together, resting often, we never turned back until our destination had been reached, and to help

¹¹ **Resurrection**: allusion to the account of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ recorded in The Bible

¹² **brogans**: heavy ankle-high shoes

pass the time, we took up lying. From the
340 beginning Doodle was a terrible liar and he got me in the habit. Had anyone stopped to listen to us, we would have been sent off to Dix Hill.

My lies were scary, involved, and
345 usually pointless, but Doodle's were twice as crazy. People in his stories all had wings and flew wherever they wanted to go. His favorite lie was about a boy named Peter who had a pet peacock with a ten-foot tail.
350 Peter wore a golden robe that glittered so brightly that when he walked through the sunflowers they turned away from the sun to face him. When Peter was ready to go to sleep, the peacock spread his
355 magnificent tail, enfolding the boy gently like a closing go-to-sleep flower, burying him in the glorious iridescent¹³, rustling vortex¹⁴. Yes, I must admit it. Doodle could beat me lying.

360 Doodle and I spent lots of time thinking about our future. We decided that when we were grown we'd live in Old Woman Swamp and pick dog-tongue for a living. Beside the stream, he planned, we'd
365 build us a house of whispering leaves and the swamp birds would be our chickens. All day long (when we weren't gathering dog's-tongue¹⁵ we'd swing through the cypresses on the rope vines, and if it rained
370 we'd huddle beneath an umbrella tree and play stickfrog. Mama and Daddy could come and live with us if they wanted to. He even came up with the idea that he could marry Mama and I could marry Daddy. Of
375 course, I was old enough to know this

¹³ **iridescent**: rainbowlike; displaying a shifting range of colors

¹⁴ **vortex**: something resembling a whirlpool

¹⁵ **dog's-tongue**: wild vanilla

wouldn't work out, but the picture he painted was so beautiful and serene that all I could do was whisper Yes, yes.

Once I had succeeded in teaching
380 Doodle to walk, I began to believe in my own infallibility¹⁶, and I prepared a terrific development program for him, unknown to Mama and Daddy, of course. I would teach him to run, to swim, to
385 climb trees, and to fight. He, too, now believed in my infallibility, so we set the deadline for these accomplishments less than a year away, when, it had been decided, Doodle could start to school.
390 That winter we didn't make much progress, for I was in school and Doodle suffered from one bad cold after another. But when spring came, rich and warm, we raised our sights again. Success lay at the
395 end of summer like a pot of gold, and our campaign got off to a good start. On hot days, Doodle and I went down to Horsehead Landing, and I gave him swimming lessons or showed him how to
400 row a boat. Sometimes we descended into the cool greenness of Old Woman Swamp and climbed the rope vines or boxed scientifically beneath the pine where he had learned to walk. Promise hung about
405 us like the leaves, and wherever we looked, ferns unfurled and birds broke into song.

That summer, the summer of 1918, was blighted¹⁷. In May and June there was
410 no rain and the crops withered, curled up, then died under the thirsty sun. One

morning in July a hurricane came out of the east, tipping over the oaks in the yard and splitting the limbs of the elm trees.

415 That afternoon it roared back out of the west, blew the fallen oaks around, snapping their roots and tearing them out of the earth like a hawk at the entrails¹⁸ of a chicken. Cotton bolls were wrenched
420 from the stalks and lay like green walnuts in the valleys between the rows, while the cornfield leaned over uniformly so that the tassels touched the ground. Doodle and I followed Daddy out into the cotton field,
425 where he stood, shoulders sagging, surveying the ruin. When his chin sank down onto his chest, we were frightened, and Doodle slipped his hand into mine. Suddenly Daddy straightened his
430 shoulders, raised a giant knuckle fist, and with a voice that seemed to rumble out of the earth itself began cursing the weather and the Republican Party¹⁹. Doodle and I prodding each other and giggling, went
435 back to the house, knowing that everything would be all right.

And during that summer, strange names were heard through the house: Chateau-Thierry, Amiens, Soissons, and in
440 her blessing at the supper table, Mama once said, "And bless the Pearsons, whose boy Joe was lost at Belleau Wood²⁰."

So we came to that clove of seasons. School was only a few weeks
445 away, and Doodle was far behind schedule. He could barely clear the ground when climbing up the rope vines, and his swimming was certainly not passable. We

¹⁶ **infallibility**: the state or condition of being incapable of error

¹⁷ **blighted**: suffering from conditions that destroy or prevent growth

¹⁸ **entrails**: inner organs; guts

¹⁹ **Republican party**: At this time most Southern farmers were loyal Democrats

²⁰ **Chateau-Thierry, Amiens, Soissons, ...Belleau Wood**: World War I battle sites in France.

decided to double our efforts, to make
450 that list drive and reach our pot of gold. I
made him swim until he turned blue and
row until he couldn't lift an oar. Wherever
we went, I purposely walked fast, and
although he kept up, his face turned red
455 and his eyes became glazed. Once, he
could go no further, so he collapsed on the
ground and began to cry.

"Aw, come on, Doodle," I urged.

"You can do it. Do you want to be different
460 from everybody else when you start
school?"

"Does it make any difference?"

"It certainly does," I said. "Now,
come on," and I helped him up.

465 As we slipped through dog days,
Doodle began to look feverish, and Mama
felt his forehead, asking him if he felt ill. At
night he didn't sleep well, and sometimes
he had nightmares, crying out until I
470 touched him and said, "Wake up, Doodle.
Wake up."

It was Saturday noon, just a few
days before school was to start. I should
have already admitted defeat, but my
475 pride wouldn't let me. The excitement of
our program had now been gone for
weeks, but still we kept on with a tired
doggedness²¹. It was too late to turn back,
for we had both wandered too far into a
480 net of expectations and left no crumbs
behind.

Daddy, Mama, Doodle, and I were
seated at the dining-room table having
lunch. It was a hot day, with all the
485 windows and doors open in case a breeze
should come. In the kitchen Aunt Nicey
was humming softly. After a long silence,

Daddy spoke. "It's so calm, I wouldn't be
surprised if we had a storm this
490 afternoon."

"I haven't heard a rain frog," said
Mama, who believed in signs, as she
served the bread around the table.

"I did," declared Doodle. "Down in
495 the swamp-"

"He didn't," I said contrarily.

"You did, eh?" said Daddy, ignoring
my denial.

"I certainly did," Doodle reiterated²²,
500 scowling at me over the top of his iced-tea
glass, and we were quiet again.

Suddenly, from out in the yard,
came a strange croaking noise. Doodle
stopped eating, with a piece of bread
505 poised ready for his mouth, his eyes
popped round like two blue buttons.
"What's that?" he whispered.

I jumped up, knocking over my
chair, and had reached the door when
510 Mama called, "Pick up the chair, sit down
again, and say excuse me."

By the time I had done this Doodle
had excused himself and had slipped out
into the yard. He was looking up into the
515 bleeding tree. "It's a great big red bird!" he
called.

The bird croaked loudly again, and
Mama and Daddy came out into the yard.
We shaded our eyes with our hands
520 against the hazy glare of the sun and
peered up through the still leaves. On the
topmost branch a bird the size of a
chicken, with scarlet feathers and long
legs, was perched precariously²³. Its wings
525 hung down loosely, and as we watched, a

²¹ **doggedness**: stubbornness; persistence

²² **reiterated**: repeated

²³ **precariously**: unsteadily; insecurely

feather dropped away and floated slowly down through the green leaves.

"It's not even frightened of us,"
Mama said.

530 "It looks tired," Daddy added. "Or
maybe sick."

Doodle's hands were clasped at his
throat, and I had never seen him stand still
so long. "What is it?" he asked. Daddy
535 shook his head. "I don't know, maybe it's--"

At that moment the bird began to
flutter, but the wings were uncoordinated,
and amid much flapping and a spray of
flying feathers, it tumbled down, bumping
540 through the limbs of the bleeding tree and
landing at our feet with a thud. Its long,
graceful neck jerked twice into an S, then
straightened out, and the bird was still. A
white veil came over the eyes and the long
545 white beak unhinged. Its legs were crossed
and its clawlike feet were delicately curved
at rest. Even death did not mar its grace,
for it lay on the earth like a broken vase of
red flowers, and we stood around it, awed
550 by its exotic²⁴ beauty.

"It's dead," Mama said.

"What is it?" Doodle repeated.

"Go bring me the bird book," said
Daddy.

555 I ran into the house and brought
back the bird book. As we watched, Daddy
thumbed through its pages. "It's a scarlet
ibis," he said, pointing to the picture. "It
lives in the tropics-South America to
560 Florida. A storm must have brought it
here."

Sadly, we all looked back at the
bird. A scarlet ibis! How many miles it had
traveled to die like this, in *our* yard,
565 beneath the bleeding tree.

"Let's finish lunch," Mama said,
nudging us back toward the dining room.

"I'm not hungry," said Doodle, and
he knelt down beside the ibis.

570 "We've got peach cobbler for
dessert," Mama tempted from the
doorway.

Doodle remained kneeling. "I'm
going to bury him."

575 "Don't you dare touch him," Mama
warned. "There's no telling what disease
he might have had."

"All right," said Doodle. "I won't."

Daddy, Mama, and I went back to
580 the dining-room table, but we watched
Doodle through the open door. He took
out a piece of string from his pocket and,
without touching the ibis, looped one end
around its neck. Slowly, while singing softly
585 "Shall We Gather at the River," he carried
the bird around to the front yard and dug a
hole in the flower garden, next to the
petunia bed. Now we were watching him
through the front window, but he didn't
590 know it. His awkwardness at digging the
hole with a shovel whose handle was twice
as long as he was made us laugh, and we
covered our mouths with our hands so he
wouldn't hear.

595 When Doodle came into the dining
room, he found us seriously eating our
cobbler. He was pale, and lingered just
inside the screen door. "Did you get the
scarlet ibis buried?" asked Daddy.

600 Doodle didn't speak but nodded
his head.

"Go wash your hands, and then
you can have some peach cobbler," said
Mama.

605 "I'm not hungry," he said.

²⁴ **exotic**: foreign; strangely beautiful, enticing

"Dead birds is bad luck," said Aunt Nicey, poking her head from the kitchen door.

"Specially *red* dead birds!"

610 As soon as I had finished eating, Doodle and I hurried off to Horsehead Landing. Time was short, and Doodle still had a long way to go if he was going to keep up with the other boys when he
615 started school. The sun, gilded with the yellow cast of autumn, still burned fiercely, but the dark green woods through which we passed were shady and cool. When we reached the landing, Doodle said he was
620 too tired to swim, so we got into a skiff and floated down the creek with the tide. Far off in the marsh a rail was scolding, and over on the beach locusts were singing in the myrtle trees. Doodle did not speak and
625 kept his head turned away, letting one hand trail limply in the water.

After we had drifted a long way, I put the oars in place and made Doodle row back against the tide. Black clouds began
630 to gather in the southwest, and he kept watching them, trying to pull the oars a little faster. When we reached Horsehead Landing, lightning was playing across half the sky and thunder roared out, hiding
635 even the sound of the sea. The sun disappeared and darkness descended, almost like night. Flocks of marsh crows flew by, heading inland to their roosting trees; and two egrets, squawking, arose
640 from the oyster-rock shallows and careened away.

Doodle was both tired and frightened, and when he stepped from the

skiff he collapsed onto the mud, sending
645 an armada²⁵ of fiddler crabs rustling off into the marsh grass. I helped him up, and as he wiped the mud off his trousers, he smiled at me ashamedly. He had failed and we both knew it, so we started back home,
650 racing the storm. We never spoke (What are the words that can solder²⁶ cracked pride?), but I knew he was watching me, watching for a sign of mercy. The lightning was near now, and from fear he walked so
655 close behind me he kept stepping on my heels. The faster I walked, the faster he walked, so I began to run. The rain was coming, roaring through the pines, and then, like a bursting Roman candle, a gum
660 tree ahead of us was shattered by a bolt of lightning. When the deafening peal of thunder had died, and in the moment before the rain arrived, I heard Doodle, who had fallen behind, cry out,
665 "Brother, Brother, don't leave me! Don't leave me!"

The knowledge that Doodle's and my plans had come to naught was bitter, and that streak of cruelty within me
670 awakened. I ran as fast as I could, leaving him far behind with a wall of rain dividing us. The drops stung my face like nettles, and the wind flared the wet glistening leaves of the bordering trees. Soon I could
675 hear his voice no more.

I hadn't run too far before I became tired, and the flood of childish spite evanesced²⁷ as well. I stopped and waited for Doodle. The sound of rain was
680 everywhere, but the wind had died and it fell straight down in parallel paths like

²⁵ **armada**: group. *Armada* is generally used to mean "fleet, or group, of warships."

²⁶ **solder**: patch or repair Solder is a mixture of metals melted and used to repair metal parts

²⁷ **evanesced**: faded away; disappeared

ropes hanging from the sky. As I waited, I
peered through the downpour, but no one
came. Finally I went back and found him
685 huddled beneath a red nightshade bush
beside the road. He was sitting on the
ground, his face buried in his arms, which
were resting on his drawn-up knees. "Let's
go, Doodle," I said.

690 He didn't answer, so I placed my
hand on his forehead and lifted his head.
Limply, he fell backwards onto the earth.
He had been bleeding from the mouth, and
his neck and the front of his shirt were
695 stained a brilliant red.

"Doodle! Doodle!" I cried, shaking
him, but there was no answer but the ropy
rain. He lay very awkwardly, with his head
thrown far back, making his vermilion²⁸
700 neck appear unusually long and slim. His
little legs, bent sharply at the knees, had
never before seemed so fragile, so thin.

I began to weep, and the tear-
blurred vision in red before me looked very
705 familiar. "Doodle!" I screamed above the
pounding storm and threw my body to the
earth above his. For a long time, it seemed
forever, I lay there crying, sheltering my
fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy²⁹ of rain.

²⁸ **vermilion:** bright red.

²⁹ **heresy:** here, mockery. *Heresy* generally
means "denial of what is commonly believed to
be true" or "rejection of a church's teaching."